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SUBJECT: PANDO SETTLEMENTS UPDATE: C-AL9-01687

REF: SECSTATE 87251

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires John Creamer for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Per reftel request, Poloff traveled to Bolivia's Pando department on September 11-12 to discuss GOB resettlement programs with local sources. The GOB maintains the settlements are necessary to reinforce its border with Brazil and "re-establish sovereignty" in the region, while critics (and most Pando residents we spoke with) say they are intended to increase President Morales's influence in the region ahead of December elections. Pando residents appear resigned to the settlements, which many characterize as illegal but difficult to stop. Despite concerns, no one forecast violence or that GOB-aligned social groups would arrive in Pando to provoke further conflict. All said President Morales would be re-elected in December but most believe Morales would fail in his apparent bid to win most of Pando's four Senate seats. End summary.

¶2. (C) Poloff met with several sources in Pando's capital, Cobija, to discuss GOB resettlement programs, in which the GOB says up to 2500 families will each receive 75 hectares (app. 185 acres) in return for moving from Oruro, Potosi, and Cochabamba to Pando and Beni departments. In Pando, all said the resettlement program was centered around the city of Santa Rosa de Abuna. One source specifically mentioned "Province 67" as the area in which the settlers are being housed until the lands are ready for distribution. Most said the lands were near the northern border with Brazil.

¶3. (SBU) News reports place the settlements in the Santa Rosa de Abuna area, with a second cluster of settlements in Pando's Federico Roman province, between the towns of Rio Negro and Fortaleza. 320 "heads of family" are reportedly living in Santa Rosa de Abuna and another 250 in Federico Roman province, with children to join later. Other news reports mention a third settlement, possibly in the town of Filadelfia, in western Pando, or in Beni near Riberalta. At least 400 soldiers are building an "Amazonian Command" post in the town of Puerto Rico, roughly in the center of Pando.

¶4. (C) Most sources said the settlements were located on a mixture of government-owned and privately-owned lands. They said none had been formally expropriated by the GOB, but they could not cite the specific plots of land or name specific

owners. All averred that the GOB's actions were likely illegal, especially with relation to the taking of private property. Still, they said given the pervasive fear of GOB retribution, there was little chance of a significant challenge. Sources said the GOB would likely pay private property owners some amount for the land (much like an urban renewal eminent domain taking), but that it would be at the government's discretion. Land values are quite low in many parts of Pando, making it "not worth" an expensive lawsuit that could take years.

¶ 15. (C) All interviewed took for granted that the settlement programs -- as well as the increased military presence, to assist in the construction and running of the settlements -- were designed to increase support for ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party candidates in the December Senate elections. Although the total number of persons resettled is modest, the Pando department has a voting population of only 35,000, meaning the addition of an extra thousand or more votes could prove significant for the MAS party. Still, all thought the strategy would not pay the kind of dividends the GOB anticipated. Pando residents appeared confident that Morales would not win a majority in Pando and that the MAS would win either one or at most two of the four Senator positions. Pando opposition Senator Paulo Bravo said, however, that he thought the upcoming elections would be "Pando's last stand," and that a MAS sweep of the presidency and both houses of the Plurinational Assembly would lead to deep changes in Pando.

¶ 16. (C) There is no indication that MAS-allied social groups such as CONALCAM ("National Coalition for Change") are (as of now) planning to come to Pando to impose the settlements. With last year's violent conflict still on their minds, most Pando residents doubted that the settlements would lead to large-scale confrontations or violence. Pandinos generally seem very tense about the government's military presence and willing to go to great lengths to avoid further conflict.

¶ 17. (C) The opposition in Pando have a common foe in President Morales, but beyond this antipathy their unity breaks down. By all accounts, former Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez ruled Pando with a savvy mixture of patronage and ruthlessness. His absence has created a leadership vacuum. Former Fernandez ally-turned-rival Miguel "Chiquitin" Becerra told us of he may run for either Prefect or Mayor of Cobija in April 2010. However, while he almost defeated Fernandez in the 2005 race for Prefect, he has since managed to alienate both Fernandez supporters and the MAS in his attempts to disassociate himself from the September 11, 2008 conflict in Porvenir. Opposition Senators Paulo Bravo and Roger Pinto appear unwilling to confront the GOB over the settlements issue. Local civic committees are still rattled by the GOB's arrests during the period of martial law following the September 2008 conflict, with many members and officials still in hiding across the border in Brazil.

Comment

¶ 18. (C) Bolivian governments have a long history of promoting internal migration to the country's sparsely-populated eastern departments. Still, the GOB's justification for its resettlement program -- "re-establishing sovereignty" and "reinforcing the borders" with Brazil -- has failed to convince Pando residents and outside observers who see instead a concerted MAS effort to alter the region's electoral demographics to partisan advantage. Beyond the settlements, we saw few signs of GOB efforts to strengthen its presence at the main crossing into Brazil at Cobija or other border points. At this point, we doubt that the resettlement program is aimed at provoking a violent reaction in Pando, nor that the opposition there is prepared to offer one.

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